

NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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THE LIVING TARGET

OR
JACK BURTON'S
FRIEND FOR LIFE

FROM
J. N. KEEL'S
NEWS DEPOT.
Old Books
Bought, sold & exchanged.
133 E. Genesee St.



By the Author of
"Nick Carter"

"KNIFE THROWING," BREATHED NICK CARTER'S YOUNG DETECTIVE, "AND I'M THE TARGET!"

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By the Author of "NICK CARTER."

CHAPTER I.

A FRIEND FOR LIFE.

"Hit him hard!"

"Lay into him!"

"It's a fight!"

"Mistake—it's a cinch!"

Jack Burton, Nick Carter's athletic young detective novice, voiced the last sentiment, and he believed what he said.

There was a certain tough gang in Riverdale.

They hated the "swell, stuck-up academy boys like poison!" and Jack found himself in their midst.

They were ten in number, but that made no difference to Jack.

Strolling from the school, he had come upon their forest haunt, quoining ground, loafing place, hang-out, quite casually.

Then very particularly Jack leaped into their midst, a relentless cyclone of wonder, indignation and prowess.

Their "Flying Dutchman," or pivot-swinging plank, was neglected, no inevitable scrapping match was in progress—from youngest to oldest, the Riverdale hard mob of juveniles was engrossed, absorbed.

Vicious interest and excitement was focused on an inspiring exploit quite new in their experience.

"Why, you vandals!" Jack had exclaimed, on fire in an instant.

They were hanging a man!

Jack saw, or fancied he saw, just this, and he made a rush.

Five of the crowd scurried as they saw him coming at them, his arms going windmill fashion.

A biff, a tap, a smack, a double crack!

A somersault, a tumble that furrowed the soft ground, a dive that took the victim into a tree breathless, a bang of two heads together!

Then—the odds were diminished one-half.

"Nothing musty in that!" confessed the big leader of the remaining five, but rolling up his sleeves belligerently.

"Who is he?" piped another voice.

"Jack the giant-killer, I guess you'll think!" yelled one of the half-stunned victims.

"Where's he stabling—academy?"

"Yah!"

"That's enough for us!"

"We'll warp him!"

"And put bristles along his spine!"

"Markis o' Queensberry rules! Come on, old sport!" hailed the braggart, pugilist-posed leader.

"Rules or riot, it's a knockout—whole-sale!" breathed Jack.

That or nothing, he decided, as he acted, for dangling beyond the crowd that vague, suspended, writhing human being incited Jack to renewed urgency.

Bang—crack—thud—Jack did a nifty thing.

The five were standing in a row—in line with one end of the swinging pivot plank.

Jack ran, not at them, but at the other end of that strong timber.

It cut the air like a knife, it revolved like the dial needle of a lung tester.

With such a force as only such muscles as the trained ones of an expert from Nick Carter's detective school could exert, Jack Burton gave the "Flying Dutchman" a whirl.

It mowed the mob down like grain before a scythe.

One quick glance only Jack wasted on the howling, prostrate, mixed-up second section of the adversary army.

Then eyes, hands, interest were centred on what he was making for—the hanging man.

"Whew!" whistled Jack.

A man was hanging, but not hung.

A conglomerate of yellow, white, black, his mouth, a vast slit, was pouring forth the most hideous shrieks.

His eyes were almond-shaped sparks of terror.

"A Chinaman!" shouted Jack.

A Chinaman he was, and his squat limbs gyrating made him resemble a dwarfed living jumping-jack.

Still more so the string running up from his tense-drawn scalp.

For by his queue, knotted about a stout tree branch, the wriggling unfortunate was suspended.

Jack whipped out a knife, for there seemed only one way to speedily succor the unfortunate—cut him down.

An ear-splitting yell depicted the wild horror of the agonized Celestial at this.

"Killee! killee!" he raved, "but no cut hair!"

"That's so!" muttered Jack, rapidly—"loses his soul if his queue goes, he thinks. They've been hacking at it already. There you are, John!"

Crack!

Jack gave a superb leap, caught the

bending end of the tree branch easily, dropped with it on a sharp, sudden jerk.

Limb and all the Chinaman landed with a plump thud on the ground.

He swung his queue free and bestowed upon it a devoted glance.

It was intact, and his relief was magical, but as he noted where a few strands had been severed his eyes blazed.

He whirled in a quick, acrobatic way that caught Jack immensely.

Jack's hand he fondled in an expressive clasp, then he made a dive.

Out of a dense bush burrow he dug a weapon, previously flung or hidden there.

It was a saw.

Armed with this, nerved up to sudden valor by Jack's mighty deeds and Jack's championship and presence, he started lickety-switch for the mob of ten so recently constituting his persecutors.

"Hi-lah!"

"Murder!"

"It's a massacre!"

Jack was amused and then appalled.

With his clumsy weapon the Chinaman sent his foes scrambling, screaming, sprinting.

He jabbed, dented, sawed them—Jack actually feared tragic consequences.

He pursued and hindered, but had a tug of it holding back the now aroused Celestial, who gritted his teeth and bristled and chattered like a mad monkey.

"Let up, John—they're beaten," insisted Jack.

"Me givee them laundly mark!"

"That's all right, John."

"Me no John," grinned the Chinaman.

"No?"

"Me Sam Tin."

"That's it, eh?"

"You flend—velly big flend. Ah—ah!"

Staring at Jack, Sam Tin uttered the final sharp ejaculation looked scared, pleased, mysterious, awed, all at once.

"What's struck you, Sam?" propounded Jack, a little puzzled.

"Ilon-flist Jackee—oho, me know!"

"Good guesser—that's what they call me hereabouts—Jackson."

"Ah-ah!"

Sam kept circling Jack, viewing him with a perplexingly significant look.

He nodded his head as if he could not keep still for some rattling, bubbling ideas boiling over in it.

"Say!" he clacked, vociferously, "savee lifee, you!"

"Oh, no."

"Savee queue, then!"

"Maybe."

"Slave for lifee!"

"Eh?"

Jack retreated in some dismay.

Sam Tin was demonstrative, or nothing.

He flung himself on his knees at Jack's feet, and seized his hand in ardent devotional homage.

"This fellow is likely to be a nuisance!" muttered Jack—"old Chinese rule: Save life, slave for life. Don't want any slave, Sam," he spoke aloud, smiling indulgently—"can't hardly grub myself!"

"Work for you, then?"

"No, Sam, you don't owe me anything."

"Hey-hi!" he proceeded Sam, gravely—"got blicycle?"

"Oh, yes."

"Plug hat? swell toppy coat? cligell-ettes? tlan shoes?"

"Don't need those."

"Say! me steal them for you!"

Jack started to walk away.

His spurt of incidental chivalry was over; and he wanted to get back to the academy, where Buff Hutchinson was waiting for him.

His new friend was pertinacious, however.

He began to follow Jack, much in the manner of a stray dog a new master who has shown him undue and unexpected kindness.

Sam was a queer mixture of gratitude, shrewdness and frail morality.

He jabbered along that he must be allowed to express his sense of obligation to Jack.

Live, die or steal for him he would and must!

Jack gathered that he was a kind of a roustabout—the first Chinese tramp he had ever seen.

"Some sharp, good-for-nothing fellow they've banished from—Chinatown for his

misdeeds," guessed Jack, as Sam Tin betrayed a close knowledge of all the ins and outs of New York city.

Sam shamelessly confessed to having stolen a pie from the crowd which they had previously stolen, which misdemeanor was the cause of his recent aerial exercise.

Under all his actions, however, Jack saw a certain excitability and repression he could not exactly analyze.

Sam stared harder at him the longer he kept in his company, swallowed all kinds of guttural ejaculations only half-expressed.

He acted precisely like a child having something to tell, but not quite ready to tell it.

"I must get rid of him," decided Jack. "He'll be a regular bother if he gets it into his crazy noddle that I'm a great fellow and a great friend—that it's due to express his champion—worship by sacrifices and presents. Hey, John!" he hailed, coming to a desperate halt.

"No John—Sam Tin."

"Sam, then. You listen to me. I must go home."

"Sam go, too."

"No, can't have that."

Sam's face fell as if his heart was broken.

"You go home."

"No homee, no homee—Sam tlangp."

"Well, tramp along, then! You see, I've got to get to the school I belong."

"Hi-lah! you belong to schoolee?"

"Certainly."

"Ho-ha!"

Sam blinked and winked, and thrust one yellow pudgy finger at Jack as if he would like to poke him in the ribs and tell him that he was perpetrating the joke of the century.

"Why! what's the matter with that?" demanded Jack.

"You—you scholar?"

"Yes."

"Academy?"

"Academy, yes."

"Ho-ha! hi-lah! holdee me—Sam bustee laughing. You bluffee Sam—you bluffee!"

"See here, what do you mean?" demanded Jack, a little sourly, for Sam Tin, in a playful but unmistakable way,

was plainly casting aspersions on Jack's veracity.

Sam wagged his head solemnly.

"Jackee tell whopper!"

"Eh!"

"Jackee no legelar scholar at schoolee—aclademy schoolee."

"Yes, I am," insisted Jack—"regular scholar at academy."

"No, no—me know, say! me know."

Sam looked all around cautiously—he came a step or two nearer mysteriously.

Then in a sinister, impressive way, he said in a hoarse, triumphant whisper:

"Me know!"

"What are you giving me?"

"Me know—mebbe Jackee schoolee, but not aclademy schoolee!"

"See here——"

"Detectlive schoolee, mebbe?—hi-lah! ha-ah!"

"Say——"

"I tellee, Sam know Jackee Burton, ilon-flisted Jackee! brave Jackee! bullee Jackee!"

"S-sh!"

"Flend to——"

"Look here——"

Sam Tin shot out the final clincher of his amazing recognition:

"Nlick Clarter!"

CHAPTER II.

THE BLUE SILK HANDKERCHIEF.

"The mischief!"

Jack Burton gave the Chinaman a stare that made him look serious.

Sam Tin was shrewd and original.

"Why! this is almost alarming!" breathed Jack.

He was "found out"—here in the midst of a fancied security the incog. of Nick Carter's young detective trio was in peril of being penetrated!

As Jackson, Robinson and Buffington, Jack, Bob and Buff had managed so far to evade the least public hint that they were other than what they seemed to be.

A mysterious criminal case had necessitated their entering Riverdale Academy as regular students.

After it was ended, preference for the bright, jolly companionship of the warm schoolboy friends they had made had given them "a sneaking fondness" for college life.

They had lingered on the school rolls, but not professionally idle.

It seemed as if fate had placed the fearless trio just where they were most needed, for case after case within their province had come up.

They found that the schoolboy guise wonderfully helped them in prosecuting labors centering directly at the academy or its vicinity.

They had stayed on, therefore, and after just closing up an intricate slate-writing mystery, where Roxy had made a star play, the present unique incident had transpired.

Bob Ferret was in New York city—he had been summoned there the day previous by Nick Carter.

His evidence and that of Aleck White and Larry Moore was needed in a great criminal case, and with no difficulty he had secured a temporary leave of absence, ostensibly to visit his "guardian" in the metropolis.

"Bother this fellow!" soliloquized Jack, as he realized that their carefully guarded secret as to identity was liable to be betrayed.

"What are you talking about Sam?" he demanded aloud, but the Chinaman refused to be bluffed.

"You Jackee, allee samee!" he grinned. "Oh! me know—one of Nlick Clarter's blest! I see you on Bowery—ha-oh! You lickee fellee like fun who rob old man on Bloadway!"

"Won't have it, eh?" muttered Jack. "I guess how it is! This fellow has seen me in New York city, and remembers. Well, see here, Sam, I'm going to tell you something."

"All light."

"That you must never lisp."

"Sam be mumme!"

"You will be a mummy if you don't!" declared Jack. "Yes, I'm what you say—a member of Nick Carter's detective school, but I wouldn't have the people around here know it for a hundred dollars."

Sam looked grave with the responsibility resting upon him through this weighty confidence.

"So, you won't tell?"

"Killee me first!" vociferated Sam, ardently.

"It would be a poor way of showing your gratitude to peach on us—do you no good, us some harm, see? We came here on business."

"I see—Sam see. Smart Jackee! gleet Jackee! bullee detectlive!"

"So I want you to go straight away from Riverdale."

Sam looked crestfallen.

"Right straight away."

"Whatee for?"

"So you won't be tempted to betray us."

"All light—I go, but I never forgetee Jackee—savee lifee, savee queue!"

Jack felt relieved—Sam looked dolorous.

Scapegrace and knave as he naturally was, Jack's loyal rescue had touched something that was genuine in the fellow's heathen heart.

He looked quite sad, started to give Jack a last ardent look, and then suddenly he administered to himself three or four raps on the head that sounded like eggs cracking on a bare cocoanut.

"Oh, Jackee!" he cried, eagerly, his eyes dancing.

"Idea struck you, Sam?"

"Gleet idee!"

"Fire it back, then."

"Jackee not too much scholar not to be detectlive yet?"

"Oh, no—that's what I'm here for, I tell you."

"Always leady to fightee bad man?"

"You bet!"

"Find mystellee?"

"Mystery? That's our stronghold, you know!"

"Hi-lah! hi-ah! Sam happy. Can do something for Jackee!"

"That so?"

"Jackee come with me, and see."

Jack nodded, smiled, and followed his excited friend promptly.

He read between the lines that Sam had run across, or fancied that he had run across, something that he suddenly remembered was right in Jack's field—the "detective" field.

He led the way to where a split in the river sent a swift current arm circling past the academy grounds, and by a roundabout course back to the main stream again.

Sam motioned caution to Jack as he penetrated the last fringe of bushes lining the waterway.

Pointing past them, he indicated a man seated, apparently fishing.

"Jackee watchee!" was all the Chinaman said.

"Watch what, Sam?" interrogated Jack.

"Jackee detective—he soon find out. Goo'-by!"

"Going, Sam, are you?"

"Yes, Jackee let Sam do notling for him, so Sam say goo'-by. Maybe Sam see him again."

"Some time, Sam. Remember! it's mum, now?"

"Sam nevee say word."

"That's right."

The Chinaman started away, straight as a beanpole, never looking back.

"He'll keep his promise," reflected Jack, watching him till he got out of sight. "He's really gone. Poor fellow! Thinks he's run me up against some detective case, eh? Why? Must have seen some suspicious manœuvres on the part of that man down yonder. Sam's sharp, and although I don't see any 'bad man' or 'mystellee' in the layout, I'll do Sam the compliment of finding out who this lone fisherman is, anyway."

All Jack saw at first was a back—a very broad back.

Then he noticed that its owner was a colored man.

Next he observed that the fellow was not paying the slightest attention to his fishing pole.

This was stuck in between two stones fast enough to hold a whale.

"I say!" uttered shrewd Jack, suddenly, and the exclamation marked a new and a vivid line of investigation and discovery.

The man had a light peacock blue silk handkerchief spread over his shoulders.

His back was to the academy, and he was holding in front of him a three-sided sectional toilet mirror.

Into this he was looking, intently, steadfastly.

"Don't know who he is," ruminated Jack; "don't know what he's up to, but the handkerchief is a signal, and he's looking into the mirror to catch the re-

flection of the academy and grounds behind him!"

Jack got tired of guessing at things—unwilling to abandon an observation that might be the start of a case, impatient to be up and away if there was nothing in it.

He walked from covert and approached the man boldly.

The latter heard his footsteps, started violently, and whipped handkerchief and mirror from view.

Arising, he stood scraping and bowing, a big, overgrown fellow, trying to be dignified while he looked quite sneaking and servile, though crafty.

"Howdy, sah, howdy!" he smirked.

"Fishing?" interrogated Jack, trying to look the prowling, aimless schoolboy curious about a stranger.

"Fishing, sah!" smiled the man—"rare sport, sah, I estimate."

"Very rare, indeed!" reflected Jack—"seeing that a fish was never yet caught in the cut-off, and everybody within a hundred miles knows it!"

Then aloud, Jack remarked:

"I see you've got no bob to your line?"

"Ah, no, sah!" quickly and speciously explained the angler. "I'se trolling, sah—quite so, trolling!"

"Sitting still?" criticised Jack, voicelessly.

Jack picked up the pole before the man could stop him.

As he lifted it, another remarkable revelation made him start without showing it.

"Why!" he spoke, "you have got neither hook nor bait on your line?"

The stranger looked mad, but deftly veiled the expression with an affectation of the greatest surprise.

"Well! well!" he goggled; "'clar' to goodness, sah! I never saw sich estroordinary fishes! Bit off the bait, hook and all! Reckon I'll decamp, sah. Have the honah, sah, of wishing you good-afternoon."

The man rolled up his line and strapped on a fish knapsack.

"Stranger here?" inquired Jack.

"To the residents, sah, I affirm—to the scenery, sah, I negate."

"Oh!"

"Very often, sah, I take a troll in these watahs—my line, a lunch, a bottle—nothing stronger than vicious watah, though, I assure you!"

Jack smiled as if this was a joke.

"Good-day, sah. If ever we meet again, you will know my name—Possum Washington. I come from Varginny—direct, sah."

Jack started inland as the angler lined the stream.

"The man's lying," he decided, bluntly, with promptness and conviction. "The name's a blind, he don't know a trout from a pickerel, and he never saw 'Varginny, sah!' Now, then, what is he up to?"

The very direction taken by the man calling himself Possum Washington proved to Jack that all his specious behavior had been a smooth way of getting rid of an unwelcome trespasser.

The fellow continued down the line of the stream.

It was so swollen, and the close shore was so littered with drift and eaten into, that it was a risk to life and limb to traverse it, especially as it was getting well on toward dusk.

"Just wanted to get free of company, eh?" reflected Jack. "Now, what for?"

The young athlete-detective had become suddenly and mightily interested.

Smaller beginnings than this, and far less sinister and promising, had marked nearly every case that had drifted into the hands of the professional trio since their visit to Riverdale Academy.

He made a feint of leaving the spot—never looking behind—that deceived the lone fisherman, it seemed.

Jack was a deft whistler, and although he never went out of sight of the river, a person stationed there, tracing the diminishing echoes, would have been certain he was moving rapidly away from its vicinity.

Jack's last initiation of a feint, faraway whistle was his signal for "getting warm" with Mr. Possum Washington again.

That distinguished individual had gone about forty yards down shore, and he stood now on a log half in the water.

He made no further feint of fishing, but as if that blue silk handkerchief was

indeed a signal, and as if darkness was soon to destroy its utility, he was waving it.

"Toward the academy—now, who? why? where? and so forth!" cogitated Jack, laboriously. "What, now! An envelope, a letter."

The man drew such from his satchel.

This he held up as he had the handkerchief.

Then he drew back a step or two as if he had executed what he came to do.

"Wish I knew who he's signaling—wish I could see the superscription on that envelope," muttered Jack, "for it's got one. The dickens!—Bob Ferret does these things different!"

No matter what Bob did, Jack's precipitate way had brought him into trouble.

Pressing forward, he detached a water-weakened crown of turf to an overlapping shore edge.

Jack had to go down in the crumbling ruin.

He bolted and rolled.

As fate would have it, Jack's course took him straight through the outspread feet of the startled, staring-faced fisherman.

"Howdy!" shouted the man—"what's this, now!"

As Jack went shooting through the inverted V form by the outplanted feet, the man's face grew dark with recognition and suspicion.

Mr. Possum Washington closed his ponderous limbs wedge-like, as if he was a machine.

They clamped shut like the sides of trap, and there Jack Burton was!

CHAPTER III.

IN FRIGHTFUL PERIL.

Possum Washington planted himself like a Colossus.

"I glimpse you—I guess you!" he shouted.

Flustered and vociferous, he twisted his head over his shoulder and glared down at his captive.

"Slipped," explained Jack, mumblingly.

He discerned that he was recognized as the late strolling schoolboy.

At the same time a closer clamp of the

mysterious angler's stout limbs told that his second appearance was suspiciously resented.

"I consider you a spy, sah!" flared Possum Washington.

"Oh, guess you don't!"

"I shall purceed, theyfore, to treat you as a prisoner of wah!"

"Let me go!"

"No, sah—not till the coah-t-martial sits!"

Mr. Possum Washington sat himself—a "coah-t-martial" of one!

His beefy firmness and rotundity of limb had not stood a test he had not anticipated.

He had caught rolling Jack Burton's arms, shoulders and chest, trapping him like a grasshopper, wings and all.

"Something of a squeezeer, sah!" he announced, viciously.

"I'm a pusher, myself!" panted Jack, from extra exertion and pressed out.

Those sturdy arms of the young detective-athlete had wonderful stored-up energy and nerve.

Jack unhinged his elbows. He "opened up" Mr. Possum Washington so suddenly that the astounded squeezeer was quite likley to split!

Possum Washington "bowed."

He cut a diamond-shaped caper that took all the strength out of him.

The delicate, ticklish sinews of the knees—Jack knew just where to tackle them—broke—his victim "unspread," and then he went flat.

The ugly yellow in his wicked eyes reddened, and he gave an angry snort.

If Jack had calmly retreated, the man would probably have allowed him to go on his way.

Jack, however, was never satisfied with half a victory.

He was curious about the envelope he had seen waved.

He was quite sure that the epistle it contained related to some sinister mystery attached to Possum Washington, and some certain unknown in or about Riverdale Academy.

Jack was determined to get hold of this probably enlightening letter—the more so as an easy way presented.

The angler's fishbag, where Jack had just seen him put the letter in question,

had swung free from its strap amid the violence of Possum Washington's spread-eagle tumble.

Jack flashed up to it.

In went his hand, out came the letter.

"Thought so!" fairly belched the fisherman.

"Know so!" he howled—"you was a-spotting me, sah! You was a eaves-dropping me, sah! Halt, sah!"

The bulky form got erect. Jack, retreating, slowed down.

Safe forward progress could only be accomplished amid the broken, drift-strewn surface of the shore by close attention to the path chosen.

Jack dared not risk turning his back to the enemy.

Possum Washington had picked up two rocks bigger than his big fists.

If they ever left his hands they would come like cannon balls.

"Must keep my eye peeled for those," reflected Jack. "Well, sir? well, sir?" he challenged, airily.

"Give me back my property, sah!"

Jack determined on a glance at the address on the envelope, at least, before he acceded, if at all.

"Drop those rocks, then."

"You audacious!"

"All right."

"You obstreperous!—this is highway robbery, sah!"

"What's squeezing the life out of a fellow as if he was an outlaw?"

Possum Washington became politic again.

"I was excited, sah!" he pretended to apologize, but he edged nearer.

"What's arming yourself with two twenty-pound bowlders?"

"I drap those. 'Scuse, young gentlemen! I was rough because I was startled."

Sure enough, the man abandoned his rock equipment.

Jack decided to accept the truce and try and throw the fellow off his guard.

He would pretend he had seized the letter as a sort of accidental reprisal or hostage.

Now he would return it, and run it and its owner down on the sly later on.

A glance at the superscription first, however, Jack felt was a necessity.

He did not get it.

Possum Washington suddenly lunged forward like a toppling house, and struck Jack like a battering ram.

He did not rely on weapons or his arms.

His bullet head was the projectile employed.

Squarely below the belt he landed a contact that was simply terrific.

Jack felt his breath shut off—the bullet head gored him back against the dirt bank and pinned him there.

Jack was momentarily paralyzed, as fully as if a great club had dealt a stunning blow.

Then, half reviving to stir into action, he found his way blocked.

With stout fish line Possum Washington had made hands and feet helpless.

With supreme satisfaction the shining malevolent face glowered down now at Jack, a captive.

"Why! you—you reprobate!" gasped Jack.

"Buttah, sah—professional buttah, sah; sportsman, sometimes. Mostly likeawise African dodger—at shows. Just now ugly, fur-ble, if you don't show up!"

The man's face had steadied down. He had Jack in his power completely, and he dropped chaffing, servility and airiness with that last sentence.

"Show up, what?" blurted Jack, desperately.

"Why did you follow me?"

"Did I?"

"Why do you want mah letter?"

"Do I?"

"Chattah away! I must find out for myself."

The man recovered his letter. Then he went over Jack's pockets.

Past experience had taught Jack to be ready for any contingency.

He fancied he had safely and discreetly seen to it that there was nothing he carried that could possibly show him up to be anything but "Jackson," student of the Riverdale Academy.

"Oh, pshaw!" he muttered, with a frown.

Just one compromising object the great, bustling paws of his captor had run across.

It was a brief note Jack had received

from Bob Ferret that morning, and Jack had forgotten to destroy it.

It was guarded enough, for it was addressed "Jackson," and it was signed "Robinson," but after announcing Bob's safe arrival in New York city, it bore the line: "Two days in court with N. C., and I'll be with you again."

To the average schoolboy or casual observer there would have been nothing enlightening or suspicion-awakening in this.

Possum Washington, however, taking Jack for a spy, must be crooked.

Being crooked, he was on the lookout for trouble—always.

At any rate, Jack saw him bend his brows darkly, and read once, twice, thrice, Bob's brief note.

"Young man," he vouchsafed leerily, "I presume you think you are a student hereabouts?"

"Why ain't I?" projected Jack.

"Who is 'N. C.'?"

"How's North Carolina?"

"Don't you gaff me, sah!"

"Just as reasonable as your 'Varginy,'

Washington gave a big start and a coarse mutter at this challenge.

"Reckon you'd be best out of the way for a time!" he said.

"Whose way?"

"Never you mind—you're dangerous, lying around loose!"

The man looked about him.

"How's that, sah!" he half grinned, half frowned.

He dragged Jack across to where eight or ten logs, drifted down stream, were massed, one ended in shore.

Deliberately he tied Jack along one log, using up all the stout fish line his bag contained.

"I'll make you comfortable for the night!" he said.

Jack was very much disgusted with the situation he found himself in.

A gag had been the last thing Mr. Possum Washington had applied.

He directed a final-unfriendly look at his captive.

"I may be back when my business hereabouts is prosecuted, sah," he vouchsafed. "P'raps you might then, in ordah

to get out of this dilemma, you might then guess that 'N. C.' stands for something nigher New York than North Carolina."

"He guesses, I know he does!" reflected Jack. "He's a city fellow, and that 'N. C.' and my shadowing can't but make him imagine an inkling of the truth."

Jack now knew that the fellow was up to something.

"It's a case, if there ever was one!" decided the student-detective, as Possum Washington disappeared. "Who's in it? Some academy fellow?"

Jack wiggled and wished. He was sorry now that he had so peremptorily dismissed poor, faithful Sam 'Tin.

The prospects of being discovered and liberated before morning were exceedingly frail ones.

"No one comes this way once in a fortnight for any purpose," calculated Jack, "and never, when the river's booming as she is now."

The river gave Jack a joggling "boom" just then, and the part of the log that extended out into the water vibrated like the tail of a stringed fish.

"Guess I'll have to put in a little leisure repenting my brashness," soliloquized the captive. "I jumped on Mr. Possum Washington too previous, it seems!"

Jack had a long spell of gloomy solitude and dullness.

Watching the deepening shadows of eventide and listening to croaking frogs and chirping crickets was no fun.

He could not whistle—even free breathing was not easy—but terrific excitement abruptly forced a violent gasp from Jack clear past the gag.

"Here's a fix!" he felt like yelling out.

"A fix" it was, of the very worst kind—the mills up stream must have just slipped their river flood gates, for the water rose magically.

The log wobbled, tugged, swung, swirled.

In company with others, it tore free from shore.

Like jolly fellows off on a riot, the released floats struck the swift current, "in

the swim" with a vim and force that made Jack's head go round and round.

Jack got big-eyed thinking what was in store for him.

His face and form were foam-dashed, and he was thankful to guess that there was no danger of his tipping body downward.

His square-set position on top of the log, its wedge shape—for it broadened below—admitted of his estimating this with some degree of accuracy and promise.

"All the same, it's a long drift—all kinds of snags, low bridges, duckings, unless I'm seen!" he decided.

One low bridge particularly Jack thought of, as his mind's eye scanned the course of the cut-off and the main river beyond as far as he was familiar with it.

The low railroad trestle, half a mile ahead, he had noticed in his walk that day.

The water was up within two inches of the stringers then.

"We'll stop there—a block—if it's any higher," he calculated, "or it's a graze under that that won't be pleasant!"

Jack knew when he was approaching the railroad bridge by glances sideways at the shores.

Like stray logs in a jam, those which had moved adrift with the one he was on shot some ahead, some trailing after.

Jack heard a dull thud a few seconds later.

"That struck the bridge," he reflected. Boom!

Jack's nerves were painfully jarred.

His float came to a swaying halt.

He surmised what he had struck—not a bridge timber, but the log just landed—point-ended against the same.

For five seconds the current swayed him in out as if pivoted.

Cling!

Jack felt as if a great wooden mallet had struck the reverse end of his log two feet from his head.

He knew, however, that it was a new arrival, another shooting log.

Then he was lifted.

A peculiar happening had transpired.

This it was:

The last log had acted as a driver.

It shunted the one he was on up across the wet, slippery one ahead.

Tilting, it drove and teetered.

Jack slanted, shot up and forward.

Then the log came squarely horizontal—firm and stationary.

Jack guessed what had occurred, with a thrill.

Jack saw what had occurred, with a shock.

The log he was helplessly tied to rested squarely across the steel tracks of the railroad bridge.

"Terrible!"

The word he could not utter, but a finger of fire seemed to impress it on brain and eye.

He heard a whistle in the distance—a locomotive whistle.

All in a whirl, as senses and thoughts were, Jack estimated time, recognizing the whistle, as could every other boy in the academy.

"Number twenty-three—the evening accommodation," he reflected, with lightning flash swiftness. "It must be—that's her toot. West bound? How else? Just made the town depot. Half an hour late. She'll be here—in twelve minutes!"

Jack shuddered—it was a bleak, unprofitable prospect.

A dark night, a lonely trestle, a late train thundering on to make up for lost time!

"I see no way out of it," reflected Jack Burton, squarely facing the situation—"this is my finish, I guess!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE THRESHOLD OF A MYSTERY.

Twelve minutes!

Jack Burton fell to figuring.

He had a nice, quiet, arithmetical seance all to himself.

Seven hundred and twenty seconds!—one—two—three—four—

"Too horrible!" he voicelessly declared—"counting is like feeling the edge of the axe before it falls. I'll think, and hope!"

Jack tried to work, as well, but the gag was like a muzzle, the thin but sure fish lines held like wire.

If he could have moved one set of muscles half an inch out of strain, he could have accomplished something.

Jack discerned this from observation and by calculating.

The log must have been twelve feet long.

He took up less than two-thirds of its surface.

The remainder—a good four feet—extended out beyond the exterior trestle rail.

If he could budge the balance, shift the weight to a very slight degree, Jack felt certain he could tip it back into the water.

But even this small life-preserving measure was not within his power.

A clammy silence of some minutes ended in a second locomotive toot.

"The second station—the train is making it," traced out Jack. "It's the long swift dash now—four minutes and——"

Would it be bang, or crash?—would the wheels grind and jelly, or by some fortuitous circumstances would the cow-catcher shunt the log overboard?

Then Jack pricked up those keen ears of his sharply.

He certainly heard a voice—a prolonged human shout.

It sounded like the half-breathless call of a fugitive.

He waited painfully—it was repeated.

Then Jack was all eyes—a figure crossed his range of vision.

He had landed not ten feet from the shore, and here at the side of the cut the banks rose double that distance.

They descended in natural steps.

Abruptly, through the top bushy fringe of the nearest rise, there shot a human figure as if hurled by some powerful force.

As it flopped close to the first ridgy step of the brief incline, however, Jack discerned that it had swung.

It was not yet intensely dark, and it was so still that Jack instantly realized something else.

The figure was that of a fugitive, for Jack could catch sharp, breathless gasps, as if the man had been running.

It hugged the surface as if hiding, and pressing closer Jack experienced a great thrill.

It was Sam Tin—his heathen friend of the late afternoon!

"Hi-lah!" he chuckled under his breath.

Jack felt that his throat would burst open with the frenzied effort he made to shout.

Fugitive or not, the loyal Chinaman would spring speedily to his rescue if he discerned his peril.

Sam, however, did not look down. His face was turned upward, if in any direction.

His pose was that of a person intently listening for tokens of a suspected pursuit.

Closer crouched the Chinaman, and Jack glared anew.

The fringe of bushes through which Sam had just slipped were parted by a new figure.

A man stood there who peered, listened, and then jangled something in his hand.

"Lighting a dark lantern," correctly read the absorbed Jack Burton.

"It's the village marshal," recognized the mute starrer, additionally.

The light flickered across the man's face as he adjusted the lantern.

Then he played its rays out, and Jack guessed that his breathless protege must have got into some new trouble since their last parting, and was now trying to elude the drag-net of justice.

Jack blinked, but a great gulp of ardent hope tremored in his throat.

The lantern's rays fell first and squarely right directly down across the log, himself, his face.

"Zounds!" was forcibly jerked out of the appalled officer.

"Jackee!" came a scream, regardlessly, on the heels of the first utterance.

Whee-ee-irk!

That was the locomotive whistle, announcing the bridge.

Paralyzed, the officer kept the lantern straight focused.

The Chinaman had seen, had recognized Jack.

He stirred into action with wriggling, flying activity.

Apparently he fully read Jack's urgency of peril—in the track of the coming locomotive.

He wasted no time tumbling, scrambling, sliding.

The acute rascal, velvet-footed and spring-limbed as was he probably cutwitted and light-fingered, risked everything on a wild leap.

Sam Tin landed on the extending end of the human-loaded log with light, felt-shod feet.

He probably hazarded a miss into the water rather than between the ties.

Fearful as well of landing on the friend for whose sake he now totally disregarded the pursuing minion of the law, Sam Tin came to a stop on the extreme end of the log.

Flop!

That was all, and that was sudden—a natural sequence to the operation of natural laws.

The Chinaman's weight tipped the log.

In the douse and mix-up that followed Jack Burton was conscious of short, animated manœuvres.

His bonds were cut by some keen-bladed instrument.

He was dragged to the shore and dropped.

A flare, a grind, a skithier, and the late express flashed by.

In its trail of dust and smoke Jack saw the village officer leap down the embankment.

"Sam!" he voiced, husky with emotion, fervent with gratitude.

"No time!"

"Hold on! I say——"

"Have to slippee—officer muchee wantee!"

"Stop, you rascal!" roared the officer in question just there.

"Go it, you—hero!" thrilled Jack Burton.

Down the shore and up the bluff sped the glorious mixture of cunning, fidelity, helplessness and courage.

The marshal flitted with him, and by the time Jack had got his unsteadied wits into working order, he knew they were far beyond hail.

"Wonder what Sam has been up to?" ruminated Jack, and then knowing it would do no possible good to hurry and find out, he added: "And I wonder what has become of Mr. Possum Washington and his mystery?"

The natural place to look for his late

mysterious captor, Jack quickly discerned, was somewhere along the stream where he had first located him.

Jack lined it, all on the alert, but found no trace.

He was wet, chilled and uncomfortable generally, and decided to "mend up" before he resumed the trail of the certain mystery that was focusing in the vicinity.

The moon had come up. If it had not been for this fact, Jack would have missed a sight that suddenly re-inspired him.

Across the stream, standing under a tree, was Mr. Possum Washington.

He was talking to a boy, and the boy wore a mask.

Jack could not hear what they were saying, for the distance was too great.

He could, however, trace the peremptory insolence of a tyrant in Possum Washington's mien.

In that of the strangely masked boy was plainly depicted terror and subjugation.

The boy handed a bundle to the negro, which the latter placed in his fish bag.

Then the big, burly wretch pointed at his companion's vest.

The boy took off watch and chain, handed it over to the other as if he was an armed highwayman.

Possum Washington turned to go away—the boy made a pleading gesture.

He seemed to bend his head as if he was weeping bitterly.

Before Jack could quite make up his mind to swim the stream, Possum Washington had disappeared.

Jack reflected a minute or two.

"This end of it is the surest one in sight, I guess," he decided, starting down one side of the stream as the boy started down the other.

At the railroad bridge the boy crossed over.

Jack hid till he passed him.

He waited till he got up the bank.

Instantly the boy made a quick run across clear country.

"Headed for the school—an academy boy!" reflected Jack.

The boy pulled off his mask and threw it behind him, but he did not turn his face so that Jack could see it.

"Wears a mask—slightly mysterious!" continued Jack. "He mustn't slip me."

The boy darted down a side path rounding the academy grounds, and entered a rear entrance in a hurried, stealthy way.

Jack was deftly on his trail—the young detective was unobserved, unsuspected, not ten feet behind the mysterious masker, as the latter entered an unlighted corridor on the third floor.

He paused at the door of one of the rooms, took out a key, unlocked it, and pushed it open.

Jack could hear him panting from the vivid exercise of his rapid run.

Just as the boy was about to close the door Jack ran up.

He put his foot between the returning door and its frame.

"Who—who are you?" demanded the boy, in a frightened, startled tone, peering in the darkness.

"Never mind."

"You can't come in here!"

"I must come in here," spoke Jack, firmly.

He pressed the boy aside, and pushed him away from the door.

Locking it, setting his back against it, Jack Burton felt that he had run at least one-half of his game to quarry.

CHAPTER V.

PICKING UP CLUES.

"Who are you?" instantly shot out in the darkness.

"Strike a light, and see," came Jack's prompt reply.

A painful series of gasps told of fluttering hesitancy and fear.

"I'll do it for you," announced Jack, after waiting half a minute.

Jack took the key out of the door and flared a match.

Puff!

The other occupant of the room had slipped in behind him and blew it out.

"Don't do that again," spoke Jack very sternly.

"Listen to me."

Jack felt trembling fingers clutch his arm.

"I beg of you not to stay here—I beg of you to go away at once!" followed in frantic accents.

"No."

"You will ruin me, you will bring new trouble——"

"Ah! there's old trouble, is here?"

"Please go!"

"Not till I have had a talk with you."

"Why—why not?"

"Because I want to help you."

"If you do, leave at once!"

"Because I am the enemy—the relentless enemy of the man you have just left near the river."

A poignant cry greeted this.

"He is—he is my friend!" insisted the masked boy.

"What! a man who robs you of your watch and chain a friend?"

"I gave them to him—freely."

"Then he is a blackmailer!"

The boy tore away—Jack heard him fall or fling himself upon some couch.

Tere arose upon the still air of the pitchy dark room a lost, heartbroken cry:

"I'm found out—it's all over!"

"It's just begun, you mean. Brace up! Now, then, to see who you are. Ah!"

Jack had lit a lamp—stepping back, he took a survey of the mysterious recent companion of Mr. Possum Washington.

He instantly recognized him.

"One of the Buckley twins," he commented.

The boy showed his face, hid his face, and groaned.

"Lewis and Paul," went on Jack.

"You're Paul."

Jack jogged his memory.

The Buckley boys were "pretty good fellows," who had entered school quite recently.

They looked a great deal alike, and some festive fun had grown out of this during the first week of their experience.

Jack remembered now, however, that for some days he had missed both from class-room and campus.

"Yes, you're Paul," he went on.

"Where's Lewis? Oh, I see!"

"Don't you do it—don't you go near him! Leave him alone! I'll—I'll——"

Jack had started for one of the two beds in the room.

A form lay huddled there, and its suspicious quietude amid the commotion of the moment awakened his curiosity.

Suspicion flamed up with the young

detective as Paul Buckley sprang erect, and with all his force attempted to prevent him from approaching the recumbent form.

"Something wrong here!" observed Jack. "Don't act the lunatic, quite! I'm going to investigate things."

Jack easily held his adversary aside while he proceeded toward the bed.

He poked at the silent figure, then he pulled the bed clothes away from its head.

"Hello! hello! hello!" he ejaculated, loudly.

Jack took a second look.

"Stuffed!"

He jerked the counterpane clear off.

"A dummy!" he added. "Now, then, Paul Buckley, what is the meaning of all this?"

The boy addressed was crying like an angry schoolgirl.

"What business is it of yours?" he flashed out.

"Would your rather I'd bring the faculty to answer that question?" demanded Jack, making a feint for the door.

"No, no—don't do that!"

"Then be reasonable."

The boy flung himself into a chair—Jack let him get over his hysterical outburst before he tackled him again.

"See here," he said, persuasively, seating himself opposite the other, "I'm a pretty good sort of a fellow, don't you think?"

"I know you are—I've heard the boys talk of you—but—"

"You're in trouble? You don't want any advice? You resent any interference. Well, suppose I tell you that the man you met—the colored man—Mr. Possum Washington, as he calls himself—tried to kill me to-night?"

The boy looked up, white and startled.

"Wouldn't you say then I have some reason to be interested in you seeing that you know him?"

"Y-yes."

"I guess so! You listen!"

Jack told a quick story.

When he had concluded he was sure that his auditor saw in him only a riled-up schoolboy, very anxious to "get even"

with Possum Washington, and naturally anxious to learn what had brought him to Riverdale Academy.

"Who is this Washington fellow, anyway?" inquired Jack.

"I don't know—I never saw him till to-night."

"You didn't?"

"Honest!"

"What's the meaning of that dummy? Look here, Paul Buckley. I want to tell you something. I'm going to run down this Possum Washington—you can help me. I'm going also to find out what gives him the right to haul you around in a mask, and rob you of your jewelry. Better be frank with me. I'm the fellow who can help you out of your troubles—now, I tell you!"

Jack had some difficulty in gaining Paul Buckley's confidence—further trouble in getting him to be coherent.

Finally the boy agreed to tell his wretched story.

"It's about my brother—all about Lewis," he confessed.

"I thought so," nodded Jack, with a glance at the dummy figure on the bed.

"He's been away from the academy for five days."

"What?"

"Yes."

"How could that be—I've missed you both, but the professors——"

"I've played his part," rather shamefacedly confessed Paul Buckley. "His tutor is old, half-blind Soper, and I did it some way, that's all," was concluded, desperately.

"And the dummy was to show your brother sick? asleep? when any one bolted in on you?"

"Yes," gulped Paul Buckley.

"You've kept this up for five days?"

"I have."

"Well," commented Jack slowly, with a critical survey of the pale, drawn face of the young fellow, "you look it."

"I've suffered horribly!" narrated the latter, in a hollow tone. "I'll tell you the way of it."

"What is the way of it?"

"Lewis is the best fellow in the world——"

"Good for you for saying it!"

"Only, since he broke his arm in a

football game before he came here, he's not been the same."

"How different?" interrogated Jack.

"Oh, queer! and the pain bothered him. He was a crack champion, and to be laid up worried him. Three times since we came here he's bolted for the city—he said the pain of the old hurt was so bad he had to see a doctor."

"I hope he didn't get reckless, and think drink helped him?"

"Say!" fired up Paul Buckley, with a vim Jack was glad to see, "you get right out of here if you dare to insinuate such a thing of Lewis!"

"I don't, and you say he doesn't, and that settles it, don't it?" placated Jack soothingly—"but why should he go to New York city to see a doctor, when Riverdale is full of them?"

"I—I don't know," admitted Paul Buckley, helplessly.

"Well, go on."

"Last Saturday he stole away again."

"Five days ago."

"Yes. The next day came a note to me from him, urging me to hide his absence—he'd be back soon, he claimed."

"And hasn't he come?"

"As I told you. This morning I got another note. It told me to pack up his second-best suit, and to watch out for a colored man who would hang around the creek fishing with his blue silk handkerchief strung over his shoulders, and who would have a letter for me—to give the suit to him."

"I see."

"I saw him—this Possum Washington, as you call him. I did as Lewis asked me. I begged of the man to tell me where he was, how he was."

"Would he?"

"All the satisfaction he gave me was a brief letter from Lewis, saying that if I lisped a word of the truth he was lost. The man asked me for my watch and chain, and I had to give it to him. I went masked, for fear I'd be seen, watched and discovered. Oh, I'm worried to death. Some bad crowd has got hold of Lewis—he's lost—he's——"

"Check it! don't be a baby," censured Jack practically. "We are not through yet. You have no idea why any one would hold your brother a prisoner?"

"I have not."

"Nor why he sent for a poor suit of clothes when he had a good one on?"

The baffled boy shook his head negatively.

"And you've never found anything suspicious, after these visits of his to New York?"

"Yes, I have—not exactly suspicious, but queer," stated Paul Buckley, with a slight spurt of animated memory.

"What?"

Paul Buckley went over to a bureau drawer, unlocked it, and took out a small object.

"I found this on the floor where it must have fallen from one of his pockets," he said.

He handed the article to Jack Burton.

Nick Carter's young detective said nothing, but one snap of his intelligent eyes told that he instantly recognized the article, although he slipped it into his pocket with apparent carelessness.

"It's some kind of a pipe, isn't it?" interrupted Paul Buckley.

"Seems so. I'll keep it and look it up further. Now, be sure again—there was nothing in the suit pockets you sent to-day?"

"Nothing, no—oh, yes—one of Lewis' keys."

"Key to what?" demanded Jack, sharply.

"I don't know."

"One he always carries?"

"One he sometimes carried."

"Peculiar key?"

"Yes, very—flat and pointed—and with tiny wards."

"That's all you know about it?"

"All."

Jack Burton leaned back in his chair and shaded his eyes.

He reflected for a moment or two.

Then he got up.

His companion's face was positively painful in its expression.

He regarded Jack as though the latter held in his keeping all his welfare and that of his missing brother.

"Oh, say something—say something encouraging!" he pleaded.

"Why, certainly!" answered Jack.

"I'll have your brother back here inside of two days."

"Sure? sure? how can that be!"

"Trust me, that's all, and not a word to anybody."

"Not a lisp!"

"I'm going to New York in the morning," said Jack.

"To look for him?"

"To find him. Should I telegraph for you, come straight at once."

"I will, indeed!"

"I'll see you before I go, and may think out something more definite by then."

"You're a good fellow! My! how you've relieved me! What can I ever do for you?"

"Go to sleep, and get freshened up to keep this affair mum forty-eight hours longer," simply advised Jack Burton.

Jack was cool enough till he got rid of Paul Buckley.

Once on the way to his room, however, he broke loose.

"The New York end, quick and sharp," he soliloquized, spiritedly.

"That 'pipe' is clue number one. I think I guess the secret of Lewis Buckley's pain-killing visits to New York city!

"That key is the essence of the whole mystery," went on Jack—"it was the key, not the suit, they were after. Young Lewis Buckley is in hard hands, and his captors are playing for some big stake. What?"

Jack entered his room to guess, to prepare to find out.

He shivered as he lit the lamp, for his clothes were still wet.

"Hello! window open!" he ejaculated.

"That's what makes it so chilly. How comes that? Blow me to pieces! What's this?"

Jack Burton almost reeled.

A glance at the table in the middle of the room grew to a hard, mystified, incredulous stare.

There faced him a surprise that was a shock.

There faced him something that fairly took his breath away; it announced a mix-up that threatened to set the mystery of the missing academy boy temporarily in the background, and possibly as well bring Jack into serious trouble.

CHAPTER VI.

HEADED DIRECT.

In the middle of the table was a military hat.

Beside it lay a fine sword, a gold-headed cane, a costly silk umbrella.

A toilet case and an immense bouquet of roses completed the outfit.

But for these latter and two crossed peculiar pieces of wood bracing them up, Jack might have puzzled his brain a long time to guess out correctly what the spread could possibly mean.

"Chop sticks!" he ejaculated.

Such the pieces of wood were that sustained the bouquet as a palpable triumphal floral offering.

"Sam Tin!" added Jack, convincedly.

That name was the key to the apparent mystery.

The grateful, irrepressible rascal-hero heathen had certainly brought the plunder.

He had threatened to do it, and he had kept his word.

Jack had ordered him out of Riverdale, but before going Sam had made one last effort to "do himself proud."

His rescuer, his preserver, deserved a reward for his kindness.

Somewhere and somehow Sam Tin had broken into somebody's house.

He had carted off all he could lay his hands on, and there was the result.

"And that's why the marshal was after him!" decided Jack.

The young detective regarded the unwelcome trophies of his valor with a leery eye.

"Confound the fellow!" he uttered, quite concernedly.

Then Jack's fine face softened, as it always did when mixed in with the rough grit of humanity he detected a sparkle or two of genuine gold.

"I won't say that," he added—"poor Sam has gone according to his lights. Still, the question is if I'm not in something of a fix?"

Jack did not fancy being hauled up for receiving stole property.

Sam had been detected or suspected, hence the presence of the marshal at the railroad bridge.

Sam had promised not to reveal Jack's true detective identity.

Still, if arrested, scared, rattled, he might let a hint drop.

At any rate, the plunder must be returned, and Jack must square himself as an incidental schoolboy friend of Sam Tin.

"I must get this complication out of the way instantly," he decided. "It won't do to leave loose strings of this tangling kind behind me. Yes, I'll get rid of the stuff, and then put mind and heart into this Buckley case."

Jack made a comfortable change of attire, ran down stairs, and got a quick lunch.

Coming back to his room, he made a compact parcel of the "offering to the gods." Impetuous Sam Tin had so cleverly sneaked into his apartment.

Jack transferred the "pipe" Paul Buckley had found in his brother's pocket, viewing it critically once more.

He studied the little bowl-like trifle, his lips puckered to a silent, thoughtful whistle, his eyes expressing a good deal of animated surmise.

"Pretty clear pointer," he spoke, stowing it away again. "This and Possum Washington make as good a starter as a fellow could ask for—the trail runs direct to New York city."

Jack left his room, and came outside the academy, a trifle undecided.

He did not like to appear publicly in the matter of Sam Tin's burglarious episode, if he could help it.

He was half-minded to make for the river, and try and hunt up the Chinaman.

He would endeavor to coax some morality into the fellow's nature, show him the error of his ways.

At least he had sufficient influence over Sam to induce him to return the stuff to its rightful owner.

"Like hunting a haystack for a needle, I fear," concluded Jack. "Sam has got away, he's that slippery. I'll try and explain things to the marshal best I can."

The village official's office was in one of the public buildings of Riverdale.

When Jack reached it, he stood outside of its door for a minute or two staring hard.

Inside a subordinate was scraping clay, crusted mud and sand from the marshal's clothing.

The latter looked as if he had been pulled along the bottom of the creek, at the tail end of a dredger.

"Sam's been giving him a brisk run, I see," soliloquized Jack. "Bet it was for nothing, too!"

In this Jack found himself mistaken a minute or two afterward.

He entered the place, instantly discerning that the official recognized him.

"Why, hello!" blurted the marshal.

"Know me?" smiled Jack.

"Reckon I'll never forget that thirty seconds I held my mask lantern rays on your face!" vociferated the marshal. "I see you, the locomotive headlight, the log—ugh! it makes me shiver—they'll haunt my dreams for a month!"

"It was a close shave," nodded Jack, carelessly, sorry, however, that the marshal remembered.

"How came you on the railroad bridge, anyway?"

"Oh, there's lots of rattlebrained people who tie a fellow to a log, never calculating how soon it may slip down stream into a position they never intended," evaded Jack cleverly.

"Oh, some of the fellows hazing eh?"

"Never mind—that's over," spoke Jack, glad to thus readily get rid of explanations. "Marshal, I reckon I've found some stuff you'll be glad to recover."

Jack undid his parcel, and the official's eyes glowed.

Good for you!" he cried.

"Is that what you want?"

"Exactly. Where did you get it?"

"Ran across it in a heap at the academy, where the thief must have stowed it," truthfully answered Jack. "What is the stuff, anyway?"

"It was stolen from a room at the hotel."

"Military man?"

"Yes, colonel of a local militia company. Sword, hat, cane, flowers? Say! that beats all! What did the thieving varmint want of those—some given to the colonel at a reception last night."

"The thief took nothing else?" lead up Jack, shrewdly.

"Tried to."

"Indeed?"

"I never saw a mortal his equal!"

"How so?" insinuated Jack, curiously.

"He'd moved out a piano—wheeled a safe a foot or two. Honestly, I believe he would have carted them away, and the furniture of the room as well, if he could have handled them—he'd tackle a red-hot stove—that kind of a fellow would!"

Jack smiled, while recognizing the entire gravity of the situation.

"And he's as comical and chirp as a cricket," went on the marshal. "Bless me! when I caught him——"

Jack gave a start.

"Ah! you caught him then, did you?" he murmured.

"Cert. It's a lively crook that slips through my fingers, when I get good and tight after him!" vaunted the official.

"Well, when I caught him, bless me! if he didn't put on that guileless grin of his, after leading me through half-a-mile of mud and ten feet down into a clay pit, and tell me 'Blad walking, marshal—get coatee dustee!'"

"Where is he?" inquired Jack.

"In the cooler."

"Can I see him?"

The marshal looked not unwilling to oblige Jack, but a trifle surprised.

"Why!" he began, but instantly checked himself—"I see," he added—"naturally interested."

"He saved my life, you know."

"And never bragged of it. I sort of coddled to him when I thought of that, but he wouldn't have it. 'Savee nothing!' he declared. 'Jumpee to savee self. Loafee academy boy velly bad!'"

"The rascally fraud!" half-chuckled Jack, under his breath.

But a further astounder greeted him as he was led by the marshal to the little town jail near by.

"Here, Sam Tin," called out the marshal, ushering Jack into the cell corridor, "some one to see you."

The Chinaman dragged himself lazily from a bench.

His little beady eyes twinkled once—then in bland innocence they scanned Jack as if he wasn't there at all.

"True blue, and an actor from Way-buck!" commented Jack.

"Who see me—I know noddlee!" declared Sam.

"This young gentleman."

"Who he?"

"You cheeky rascal!" hailed Jack, the minute they were left alone.

Sam Tin thought it safe to grin now.

"Do you realize that you saved my life?"

"Some other fellee!"

"No, it wasn't 'some other fellee!' it was great Sam Tim, and you're a rare jewel, if things wouldn't stick so tightly to your fingers!"

Sam understood perfectly but he sadly regarded his podgy-ended digits as if they were bad children he could not control.

"Why did you get yourself into this horrible fix?" proceeded Jack.

Snipee for Jackee!"

"Yes, but look here——"

"Jackee better man than makee-believe soldier."

"Think so, eh?"

"Warmee spot flor Jackee—here!"

Sam put his hand to his heart—grotesque as he looked, muddy, bedraggled, tattered, there was a rude, catchy eloquence in words and manner.

"Well, I'm sorry, Sam, for you're ticketted for a sentence, I fear."

"Bullee, good!"

"They'll keep you locked up for a month."

"Hi-lah! plenty eatee, plentee sleepee, all lightee, me no kickee!" insisted the philosophically happy Sam.

"I'll speak to the marshal, and try to make it light."

"Sam not care."

"And I'll come and see you when I get back."

"Jackee going away?"

"For a day or two, and say! Sam—not a word about what we agreed?"

"What Jackee mean?"

"'Jackson,' you know, not Jack Burton?"

"Oh—ah! who Jackee Burton?" demanded the audaciously ignorant prisoner.

"Nor Nick Carter?"

"Who he?" interrogated Sam, with a vacant stare that was positively idiotic.

"Yee'll do!" commended Jack.

The young detective felt that his secret was safe.

He shook hands in warm alliance with his strange, happy-go-lucky acquaintance.

Then he groped down into his pocket.

"I'm going to leave you a little change to get extra grub if you find their rations too short here, Sam," he explained.

"Sam no wantee."

"Sam gottee havee, see?" smiled Jack. He hauled out a handful of change.

Poking aside in his palm several other articles he had fished up with the coin, Jack noticed Sam make an eager dart and fix a settled stare.

"What you looking at, Sam?" he asked, quite curiously.

Sam rather gravely brought the point of his finger down on the object that Paul Buckley had given Jack an hour previous.

It was the bowl, the "pipe," found in the pocket of his brother, Lewis Buckley, after one of his pain-easing visits to New York city.

Jack had known long before this what it was.

He had seen its prototype very often during professional explorations in the metropolis.

Sam knew what it was, too, the minute his eyes lit on it.

"Bad, Jackee!" he pronounced, solemnly, "velly bad!"

"What is, Sam?"

"Jackee hittee pipe!"

"Oh, no—but this is an opium pipe?"

"Sure!"

"I thought so. No, Sam, this is something that does not belong to me."

"You find?"

"Yes, I found it."

"Where?"

Sam had the queer bowl piece in his hands now, and was looking it over critically.

"Oh, around here."

"Not belong here."

"No?"

Jack became interested in what Sam was saying.

"Belong New York."

"You know that, do you?"

"Oh, sure so!"

"Lots like it, you mean?"

"No, this!" asserted Sam, with entire positiveness.

Jack Burton's eyes glowed professionally keen.

He stired with curiosity and expectation.

An hour since that little bowl had given him a sure hint as to the identity of Lewis Buckley's "doctors" in New York city.

If Sam Tin knew where it belonged, where it came from. Why!

"Jackee wantee know muchee?" queried his almond-eyed friend.

"The worst way, Sam!"

"Detective case?"

"Yes, Sam, it is."

"Ho-ah! Goodee! This pipe——"

"Yes? yes?"

"See where cuttee knife name—Chinee name?"

Jack nodded, as peering close he made out some characters carved into the tiny bowl.

"That who," informed Sam.

"And who is that?"

Jack Burton felt all his professional hope, zest and acumen veer to a definite point like a pole-drawn magnetic needle, at Sam Tin's reply.

It gave him the hint direct, he was sure.

Where that pipe came from was the missing academy student—Lewis Buckley.

And clever Sam Tin had told him instantly where that was.

"Charley Yen, Chinatown, New York city."

CHAPTER VIII.

IN "CHINATOWN."

Jack Burton hovered at the portals of mystery.

He was in New York city, at its most secret recesses.

He was in a street within a street, buildings within buildings—the hidden heart of Chinatown.

Jack fancied he had seen all the under surface life of the great metropolis heretofore, but never as now, he somewhat wonderingly confessed.

Even a detective cannot know everything.

While he is learning his full share, the criminal—keen, alert, progressive—keeps steady pace with him.

As the emissary of justice makes fresh discoveries, the criminal puts up constantly new barriers for his natural enemy to climb.

Immediately after Sam Tin's enlightening identification of the opium pipe, Jack had left Riverdale for the city.

He had brought his trusty partner and associate, Buff Hutchinson, with him.

They and Bob Ferret had made fast friend of one of the professors by recently helping him recover some valuable stolen chemicals.

In this they had posed as students, but had worked like the natural born detectives they were.

Diplomatic Jack, therefore, had little difficulty in convincing this gentleman that they were the proper agents to make needed laboratory purchases in the city.

Knowing just what to do and how to do it, inside of six hours after their arrival in the metropolis, Nick Carter's two young detectives had run their clue to quarry, or fancied they had.

Now, disguised as newsboys, and seemingly engaged in a game of "craps," they sat on the pavement of a passageway between two buildings, and opposite that which Jack Burton decided held the man he was after—Charley Yen.

"That's the place, you think, Jack?" interrogated Buff, under his breath, sandwiching in enough voluble slang of the game to delude any listeners, should such be in range.

"From all I can gather, the fellow Sam Tin told me about, the owner of the opium pipe bowl found in Lewis Buckley's possession—Charlie Yen—is housed somewhere within that mysterious building, yes."

"Looks like a jail?"

"It isn't."

"What might it be now?"

"It's the carefully guarded theatre, gambling den and Joss house of the exclusive four hundred of the sporty and criminal Chinese population."

"We're going to have some trouble, then, getting this Buckley fellow out of his scrape."

"It's something worse than a scrape, to my way of calculating," declared Jack, seriously.

"You think that?"

"Without a doubt."

"Explain."

"I've been ruminating a good deal over what the brother of the missing student

has told us, and I have formed a pretty clear theory."

"Give it, Jack."

"Young Lewis Buckley, when he came periodically to New York city, came to smoke opium."

"Pretty young for that sort, I should say."

"Perhaps—it's like every other lure, however: grappling-hooked once it catches hold. The people who ran the dope den got to know who he was."

"And held him this time?"

"Exactly."

"Why?"

"They've got him either compromised or scared pretty badly. Possum Washington is simply their agent. He came to Riverdale to get a suit of clothes belonging to the missing fellow."

"Which contained a curious key?"

"Paul Buckley says so."

"To——"

"Guess that, and you've got it, likely. Now, either that, or revenge."

"How!" ejaculated Buff, with a vivid start.

"Revenge, I said."

"See here——"

"Well?"

"That's new to me!"

"It's very new and pretty vague to me as well," confessed Jack, "for it was only two hours ago that I found out who these Buckley boys are."

"Who?"

"Sons of a famous customs official now off on his vacation in Florida."

"Well?"

"Very active, most active, in watching out for pauper emigrants and smuggling sharpers."

"I didn't think Chinese importations and opium smuggling bothered much on this coast?"

"Enough to enable Mr. Buckley to make some pretty important seizures, and naturally the crooked Chinese crowd would have it in for him."

"Here's a plot, then?"

"I don't say so—I only mention facts."

"All we've got to do is to get into that building and snake out young Buckley."

"He may not be there."

"But you said——"

"That Charley Yen was."

"Oh!"

"And the pipe may turn out a far-fetched clue, after all."

"We can only try, then, to locate this Yen."

"You've got it."

"And if young Buckley isn't in the place, see if Yen knows where he is?"

"That's the programme, precisely. Get up, Buff. Time for action!"

"What's your cue?"

"We can't get in by that big portico entrance unless we're yellow, have the ~~letter~~ and a password. See that fence connecting two buildings?"

"Over it?"

"Yes. Out with our ball—one or two catches, then make a break."

"Here you are!"

Any person observing would have seen the two boys tossing and catching—an apparently accidental flip over the short but high fence, concealing yard or court, the young experimenters did not know which.

The top of the fence was formed of boards sawed into points.

From point to point ran twisted strands of barbed wire.

Getting up with a leap, over with a spring, and landing as lightly as a cat, was mere easy exercise for these proficient experts from the gymnasium of Nick Carter's detective school.

It was only an excuse they had sought to get over that fence.

Now, while Buff hunted for the ball, Jack took in their environment.

A small yard showed with a canopy covering it entire, thirty feet above.

Windows and doors looked into it.

"Hide—make your point! I'll guard for you and find some other way," directed Buff, quickly.

"No one looking?"

"Yes, up yonder."

"And some one coming!"

"Up yonder," Buff saw a man approach a window to casually look out.

He retreated as a deft fling of the ball flattened his nose and it bounded back to Buff.

The latter looked quickly around—Jack had disappeared.

The "some one coming" was a China-

man bearing a coal scuttle and humming a song.

"Ay-ya! ho-he! hi-a—hello! You—who?"

The fellow's eyes snapping suspiciously, he sprang at Buff.

The latter guessed his comrade was safely stowed, and was ready for banishment.

He showed the ball and explained, but the Chinaman gritted his teeth at him, unlocked a gate in the fence, and would have pushed Buff forth violently had he not skipped out without waiting.

Jack was out of sight, but not out of the yard.

When he saw the man at the window he darted toward a dark open hallway.

Then he heard some one coming from it, and decided it was hide instead of enter.

Near a little pile of wood was a huge inverted wooden bowl.

It was cracked and seamed—an immense company rice receptacle, big as the top of a cistern.

It was slightly pressed down into the dirt of the yard.

Its bulging hollowness attracted Jack.

In a jiffy he lifted it, in a flash he was under it, in a twinkling it flopped back into place.

"So far, so good!" commented Jack, complacently, watching Buff's summary banishment through one of the broad splits in the bowl.

He coddled down snugly and kept his eye on the Chinaman with the coal scuttle.

"When he gets out of the way, I'll make a sneak into this barn of a building," decided Jack.

He lay flat, calm and confident of this first step in his programme soon leading to more tangible results.

It did—very promptly.

Right on top, there commenced the first of the series of Jack Burton's extraordinary and startling adventures in Chinatown, quick and bracing as a black thunderstorm!

CHAPTER VIII.

A LIVING TARGET.

"Oho!" suddenly exclaimed Nick Carter's young detective.

Jack Burton abruptly discovered what the immense wooden bowl under which he rested was used for.

Leaky and frazzled, it had been rejected as a dish, and now did service as a chopping log.

At all events, the Chinaman whose prompt coming had prevented Jack from entering the house, and who had so summarily evicted Buff, now set his coal scuttle down by the side of Jack's covert.

He drew a short-handled axe and a thick wood slab out of the woodpile.

Crack—bang! went a blow that jarred the bowl, and vibrated like a shock along Jack's sturdy nerves.

Then, crack, crack, crack—the fellow struck a big knot, but stubbornly hacked away at it.

Immediately a crack distended the bowl, and Jack's eyes opened accordingly.

"I wouldn't like to be hit!" squirmed the apprehensive lurker.

Jack was hit—the next instant—but not with the axe.

With a plunk of the pistol-shot order, quite a chunk of the rounding surface of the bowl burst through.

Jack saw why at once.

In disturbing the bowl to slip under it, he had let it down lightly out of its old rut.

One rim rested on a half-sunken brick, and this gave less solidity to it.

The chopper moved stick and axe away from the gap he had made, but that rent was now the starting point for general disintegration.

A clump shattered, and Jack drew up one leg sharp and far as he could.

The stick went through like a driven nail, the axe grazed his ankle, and the Chinaman, thrown off his balance, fell over flat.

Jack burrowed his hands under the dirt—sunk rim of the bowl back of his head.

On the same principle that he had often, lying flat, raised Bob, or Buff, or Meek, or Larry, in the detective school gymnasium on his hands, he essayed the back-handed lift now.

The bowl came up as he elevated hands and body. Jack rose the minute it flopped over.

The effort tipped the Chinaman, and,

as he sprawled, reversing the bowl surface with the adroitness of a skilled plate-spinner, Jack popped it across the dazzled, bewildered fellow.

Jack did not know if, amid all these violent gyrations, the Chinaman caught clear sight of him or not.

He had his point in view, and he promptly made it.

The open hallway out of which the fellow had come Jack dove into.

To get into the house as he had got into the yard was his intent purpose, and he went fast.

The hall ran ten feet, and the light in it was dim.

First thing, Jack dove into a door.

That door must have been set on oiled pivots, for it seemed as if a feather would tip it.

It was constructed on a principle Jack had never run across before—had neither hinges, lock, nor knob.

It simply went back like a swinging panel, and Jack followed its forward, upward movement.

Whack!

"Worse than a turnstile!"

Jack, being unfamiliar with the tricks and the queer door arrangement, instantly hustled into trouble.

The top of the door, reversing, came down like a paddle and struck him like a giant cricket bat.

Heavy weighted, on full swing, it sent Jack so fast and far that he scurried afloat and landed in a disordered heap.

Where he struck was a wall—all metal.

All gong, too, it seemed, for instantly the pressure of his body set loose a hundred brisk tanging hammers.

"I've come the wrong way—the trap way for strangers!" breathed Jack, springing to his feet.

He at once discerned that what he had heard of this secret haunt of shifty, exclusive fellows was no fiction.

They were equipped for intruders—human or mechanical sentinels were probably on guard everywhere.

"What's the right way?" soliloquized Jack.

An opening at one side was the only avenue apparent.

Jack made a run.

"Ah! this is better," he relievedly

guessed, as he trod a corridor free of any more of those alarming doors and gongs.

A turn called for a halt or advance into a small room.

Jack started across it, looking vainly for some good hiding-place where he could snuggle till he saw what came of the gong alarm.

"Cracky!" he muttered.

He forged ahead, for he was startled.

It was "crackey!"

And cracketty-crick! puff! hiss-ss!

Jack had struck another pitfall.

How arranged he knew not, but here and there, stuck up in the cracks of the floor, were match heads.

His flying feet striking these, a series of snaps sounded forth that would attract attention half a dozen rooms away.

They were put there for just that purpose, Jack was certain.

What surprised him was the fact that no outcry from the yard sounded, no pursuit inside had followed his gong experience.

"Bound to dive into something!" he soliloquized. "All this doesn't mean nothing!"

Jack slid the last match—twenty must have snapped, flared and smoked out in his wake.

A spring past a threshold landed him in a large room.

It landed him as well up against the fate that had been waiting for him.

"Snared!" breathed Jack, quickly.

He saw what was coming, but too late to dodge out of the way.

A big, fat Chinaman popped into his path.

His hands, outstretched, held a bag, and with a sweep it came down over Jack Burton's head.

"Got!" he said, simply.

The bag was of stout silk, made full, and fitting to a flexible hoop.

This in some way Jack's captor had pressed to a perfectly rigid adjustment of Jack's arms alongside his body.

Jack, thus blindfolded and hampered, felt himself pushed.

He landed against a wall, and thought it best to stand there.

He drew in a vigorous breath, however, as he did so.

A fluffy fold of his silk nightcap came thus between his lips, and then his teeth.

Jack chewed and jerked, blew out the mouthful, and saw through the slit he had rended.

The man who had halted his forward progress was surveying him curiously.

He took out his snuff box and thoughtfully took a pinch to fortify himself for a further disposition of his captive.

"Now or never!" muttered Jack. "Here goes!"

He measured distance with a shrewd glance—it was the preface to a sudden bolt.

His head circled, and then came up.

Jack had aimed to strike the fellow under his unguarded chin, and tip him back keeling.

"I've done it!" he decided, as there was a snap, a tumble and a roar.

Then Jack's exertions were bulked in pressure against the imprisoning ring of the bag.

He snapped it more readily than he had anticipated, and drew free.

The man was sprawled about the floor, rubbing eyes and mouth in a frenzy of pain and rage.

Jack's quick eye made out four curtained doorways.

He parted one—a closet beyond—the second, frame door, and locked; the third, door, ajar.

A glance at the snuffed-out Chinaman convinced him he was too blinded to see what had become of his recent captive.

"One way good as another, I suppose," concluded Jack. "I'll try this."

He pushed the door open, pushed it shut, and found himself in a queer place.

Strips of green-painted muslin ran several feet apart across a floor.

It was like a stage-setting placed to imitate grass at a distance.

In the middle of the space, suspended from bars high up in gloom and obscurity, was a swing.

In the swing was a form resembling in dress pictures Jack had seen of the conventional Chinese mandarin.

At first Jack, halting and peering, took the motionless figure in the swing for a real person.

Then he saw that it was a dummy.

"What for?" he questioned himself, rapidly.

Before Jack could answer that question satisfactorily, beyond a heavy curtain shutting in the stage-like space the twang of some instrument and the drawl of several voices startled.

Jack was thus hemmed in—unless he risked a retreat, which after the series of alarms he had started going he considered worse than no way at all.

Then he formed his mind quickly, and acted accordingly.

Jack had the stuffed mandarin out of the swing, disrobed and placed in a muslin-guarded aisle, very promptly.

Arrayed in the fake mandarin's garb, he was in the swing quick as he could perch there.

The mandarin's face mask came out so he could turn his eyes any way he chose.

Jack turned them toward the curtain with a certain nervous, expectant stare, as it suddenly ran back on its rings.

The length of a room showed.

Just beyond the curtain was a counter resembling that of a shooting gallery, only that it held long, bright knives with wicked-looking points, instead of rifles.

A celestial inside of the counter picked up a pole.

He reached with this fifteen feet over just behind Jack's back and started him swinging.

Several jabbering fellows on the other side of the counter were picking over the knives.

Jack read the situation in a flash.

"I've put my foot in it!" he muttered in some dismay.

Then, gripping the side ropes of the swing firmly, he knew not whether to stick or jump out.

"Knife-throwing!" breathed Nick Carter's young detective with seriousness—"and I'm the target!"

CHAPTER IX.

FOUND!

Whiz—thus a knife.

Tang—the blade quivered in the plank shield at the rear of the stage space.

It was a miss, but by a hair's breadth graze that took Jack Burton's breath away.

The man inside the counter gave Jack another swing.

There was a chorus of animated voices, as if some exciting exploit was due.

Jack, peering through his thin mask, saw three knives being poised.

"All coming at once—more than I can stand!" he jerked out decisively.

Bang—bang—sideways, impelled by a sensational excitement he could not repress, he fired his revolver twice.

Jack accomplished his purpose—the room beyond was instantly in an uproar—the wholesale knife onslaught was evaded, at least temporarily.

There was a rush of frightened feet, knives clattered to the floor.

The keeper piled over the counter, and all hands scurried away from the room amid a wild babel of outcries.

Upon this exact outcome Jack had scarcely counted, but he immediately availed himself of the opportunity offered for making a disappearance.

He was out of the swing, had the re-decorated mandarin in it, himself secreted between the painted muslin strips, quick as he knew how.

Prompt as he was, however, there appeared startled, hesitating faces at the end of the room just as he ducked below the floor level.

Jack could trace fright, argument, persuasion, in the vociferous chattering that ensued.

Then, while the others hung back, the man who had charge of the room advanced timorously.

He armed himself with a knife, but abandoned it as too short—took up an iron bar, and dropped it as too heavy.

Then, picking up a long-handled sword, he pressed forward cautiously, his startled eyes showing that he was prepared to meet some astonishing surprise.

There was breathless silence with the group watching him.

The man took fully five minutes in approaching the figure in the swing.

He glared, advanced, goggled, halted—poked at the dummy—into the dummy.

Then he stood spellbound, so close to the crouching Jack that the latter could hear him utter under his breath a jargon medely that expressed stupefaction and superstition combined.

All would probably have been well, and the wondering man might have returned to his fellows trying to convince them that the recent shooting was all imagination, had he not taken a step backward.

In doing so he trod squarely, heavily on prostrate Jack's hand.

Instantly he noticed the lack of level floor, and looked down.

Instantly, too, he raised the long-handled sword.

Jack, imprisoned, menaced, bit out.

He gave the fellow's ankle a grip that unsteadied his aim and made him bellow.

Recklessly tearing the muslin strips to shreds, he dashed toward his comrades with the most frightful cries, starting a new stampede.

Up jumped Jack—lying down he had been studying overhead.

Now he availed himself of the knowledge so gleaned.

His first movement was to tear back the curtain into place.

Shutting himself in, shutting the others out, Jack sprang into his element.

Ropes, bars, rafters—over the stage space was a network of these.

It had been left thus for acrobatic possibilities, and climbing up and up, Jack felt safer and safer.

Within ten minutes, despite all the alarms he had set off, all the commotion he had caused, he felt that his aerial flight and its result could not be traced.

He had finally gained an immense, unfloored attic through a variety of squeezings between partitions, scaling of lathed surfaces.

Stairs led up to it, and at the direct top of these was a large double door.

Next across from it was a smaller door.

This was unlocked, half-opened, and Jack impulsively penetrated the apartment.

Two broken bicycles lay in one corner—half-a-dozen bicycle casings hung over a wooden peg.

Other litter, such as broken chairs, and crockery, showed the place to be a kind of storeroom.

Jack was about to turn from the apartment to pursue his investigations elsewhere, when he paused and listened.

"What now?" he interrogated.

Yawns, groans or mutterings sounded directly under his feet. The noise was so distinct that he peered quite closely at the floor.

"Thought there was some aperture open," he soliloquized—"a trap, not clear shut."

Jack sat down beside the opening in question.

Cautiously he lifted the tilted edge an inch or two.

"Hello!" he uttered simply.

The young detective's emotions, however, were of a complicated description.

Jack Burton had found what he had come to seek.

A small, close room, with only one little window near its top, and a door evidently locked from the outside, showed.

It held a couch and table only.

Upon the couch sat a young fellow a few years Jack's senior.

"Lewis Buckley!" recognized the peering Jack.

He was very much shocked to note the change in the missing academy student since last he had seen him.

The latter was dozily swaying with half-closed eyes.

Stupefied as he was, Jack discerned that he was groping for the little table upon which lay an opium smoker's outfit.

"Here's work!" declared Jack, ardently. "I'm going to get down to him."

That was a movement easy to plan—it was the getting up again that must be provided for.

More than that, young Buckley must be hoisted up as well, if that could be accomplished.

"This way the coast is clear. Beyond that door it may be all bad lands," mused Jack, "even if I could face it, which is doubtful."

Jack did some thinking, some looking around the old storeroom, and then some tinkering.

In five minutes' time he had two of the bicycle tubes cut and tied together.

Securing one end to a chair round placed across the trap space, he dangled the other clear to the floor below.

Then throwing a third one for emergencies over his shoulder, Jack slipped down his shuky, elastic cable.

The mumbling, rocking "fiend victim" on the couch started and stared, much in the manner of a drunken man, as Jack landed before him.

"Lewis Buckley," pronounced the young detective, shaking the fellow well.

"That's—that's my name," came the dreamy voice.

"Of course it's your name. See here—rouse up!"

"Sleepy!"

The boy had his eyes sufficiently open to make out the drug outfit on the table.

"No more of that!" announced Jack sternly, pocketing pipe, matches, needle and thimbleful of the drug, as his companion reached for them.

"Who are you?" droned young Buckley, looking weakly dissatisfied.

"From Riverdale Academy—from your brother, Paul."

"Eh! Oh——"

Lewis Buckley clapped his hand to his forehead. Some sentient memory was poignantly stirred.

Soon, however, he relapsed into maudlin mutterings.

"See here," spoke Jack rapidly, but with impressiveness, "you want to get out of here."

"Can't."

"I've come to help you. Do you understand that you are a prisoner—almost a week here?"

"No, no—I came only, let me see—let me see——"

"Six days ago. They may intend to kill you. They have robbed your brother. Do you understand all this—you must get out of here!"

"Can't!"

"Will you try? See this? Climb up it."

Jack urged the captive to his feet.

"No use!" he instantly decided, as Buckley staggered and nearly fell. "If this fellow is got out of this den at all, it's carry him out!"

Carry him out, lug him up, it indeed seemed necessary to do—and Jack Burton, strong as he was, persistent as he was, found muscles and patience both severely taxed during the effort made to get young Buckley up his bicycle casing cable.

Once aloft, he left his rescued charge lying on the floor for a minute or two,

while he pursued an investigation of their environment.

The double doorway led into a great decorated roomy hall.

The minute Jack saw its rich draperies, altars, and incense stands, he knew what the place was.

"Joss room—temple of these fellows," he guessed, correctly. "Perhaps the safest place to stow young Buckley in I could possibly find, till he gets his wits and strength back more clearly."

Into the room Jack led and helped his charge.

He made him lie down in the sheltered space behind a dais.

Discovering a font full of water, Jack made several applications of some cloths dipped in the same to the head of the dazed drug fiend.

Young Buckley braced up quite a little under these ministrations.

He seemed to understand now who Jack was.

When the latter attempted to question him as to the past week, however, he was dense and confused as ever.

"I'll find out what he knows about that mysterious key before we leave this place!" Jack declared determinedly to himself.

Nick Carter's young detective started to leave the temple room to make a further hunt for Charley Yen, for some person or persons who might have an interest in the key question, when he halted, listened, and every keen sense was set on acute edge.

Jack heard the voice of the very man who had secured the mysterious key——
Mr. Possum Washington.

CHAPTER X.

THE MYSTERIOUS OMNIBUS.

Jack slipped behind the dais where Lewis Buckley lay concealed.

Into the room came a sallow, sharp-eyed half-Chinaman, quite American in dress, and the lone fisherman of Riverdale.

"Tell you, sah! tell you, Valda, I 'proximate myself rather shrewd!" vaunted Possum Washington.

"Quick!" interrupted the other impatiently—"did the key fit?"

"It fitted, sah."

"The office door of young Buckley's father—the customs official?"

"Office, sah, desk, sah, private box, sah!"

"And you got——"

"The blanks."

The half-Chinaman grabbed from his companion's grasp some papers he produced.

He glanced them over eagerly.

"Fine—glorious! good for you!" he exulted.

"They'll do?"

"Do? They fix us out!"

"I got bettah to come, sah!"

"What do you mean?"

"How's that?"

The colored man produced a pocket official seal operating with a spring.

The man called Valda uttered a rapturous shout as he examined it.

As he slipped a piece of paper under it, and noticed the impress, he fairly hurried.

"Why, we're the Government for the next twelve hours!" he cried.

"Get to work, sah!"

"And you too—listen!" went on the man hurriedly. "Melaney—we can trust him—get his close bus."

"Bring it here?"

"Right away. I'll fill out and prepare the document—I'll be ready to go with him inside of fifteen minutes."

"Very good, sah! I esteem we've done a fair night's work, sah!"

"Glorious! I don't see how we can miss. Hasten, now—hasten!"

Clicking the seal compressor, the man hustled from the place, the other following fast as his portly form would allow.

Directly after them, vividly alive with conjecture, suspicion, alarm, trailed Jack Purton.

"Huh!"

Disgruntled, he came to a halt.

A door slammed in his face, spring bolted, three stories down a narrow staircase.

Jack sat down on the lowermost step, lunked in more ways than one.

At the threshold of valuable information on tap, with Lewis Buckley found, he could not follow up the one or escape with the other.

Right at his elbow was a window, but

it was fifteen feet to the ground, and young Buckley was helpless.

"That key!" uttered the baffled Jack.

"It is as I fancied all along the—boy's detention was based on some complication of his father's business. The key fitted his father's desk. The father probably left it with the son. They knew it. He is away in Florida. They got a blank, an official seal. Now, what is the riddle?"

Jack sat reflecting seriously.

The fact that within fifteen minutes a decisive move was to be made by Lewis Buckley's kidnappers, urged Jack to his best mettle.

The further fact that the conspirators Valda and Possum Washington were to be the "Government itself for twelve hours" made him tingle with desire to break down the door that had so summarily shut him off their trail.

"I must get out of this!" decided Jack. "I must get word to Buff to follow this mysterious omnibus, or do it myself."

Jack had to choose the window route, perforce—the door was jail-like in its stoutness.

It was growing dark now, and once in the yard below, high-fenced and lock-gated as it was, he could readily get to the street outside.

Jack found some difficulty in reaching open air, however.

The window was one long sash.

To remove it he had to cut and pry at inside casings, for it naturally lifted from the outside.

"Got it at last, and the fifteen minutes is up!" he breathed, lifting it into the stairs. "The bus!"

At that moment, with the clicking open and clicking shut of a gate, a two-horse vehicle dashed into the yard.

Jack fairly drew back and held his breath for fear of discovery.

The bus halting, the high front seat was not two feet away from him.

Right on a level was the driver.

He was enveloped in a rain-coat—a smallish, smooth-faced man.

He lolled sideways facing away from Jack, waiting.

"If I dared!"

Jack uttered the words as if heart, soul and fate were

His eyes flashed, and his stout nerves tingled till they shook.

An old ruse, but a daring ruse, under the present circumstances, suggested itself to him.

If he could take the fellow's place, act the fellow's part in the mysterious journey projected, he would score, he was confident, a grand finish! "I'll try it!"

To try was to do with Jack Burton.

On the stairs was the whole bicycle casing which he had dropped while removing the window.

Jack picked it up—he looped it to a small-topped eight, got the knot needed, reached out.

"Augh!"

"Silence, if you value your life!"

"Say——"

"Want it tighter—up you come!"

Jack Burton had lassoed the man on the driver's seat.

He had got a terrific twist about his neck.

The man was light, and one vigorous jerk snaked him through the window.

Jack wondered later how he managed everything so superbly.

Within three minutes he had the man up three stories, dropped into the room whence he had rescued Lewis Buckley, and the trap closed.

In another sixty seconds he was in the fellow's enveloping gossamer, and erect on the seat of the omnibus, large as life.

"Close graze!"

It was that, for a man came to the front wheel and hailed up at him not half a minute after he had got into place.

"Melaney!"

"Eh?"

"Over to Jersey City."

"Uh—huh!"

"South beyond Dacey slip."

"Right!"

"I'll tell you then where."

Jack felt as proud and exultant as the man got into the bus behind and a gate opened and he swept out into the street, as if he was driving a royal triumphal chariot.

"Sure as fate!" he told himself, "this man is going after some important load. What? I'll let him get it. If I don't find a way to deliver it where I like, and not

where he likes, later, I'm not Jack Burton!"

Buff was not in view in the vicinity of the buildings they were leaving.

Jack drove as directed. His fare ordered a halt near a lonely slip across the river. Jack wondered where he was headed for, as he put down a long wharf. It had a brick building, lighted, at its extreme end, guarded by a gate. Near it was an old boat that looked like a floating boarding-house, and several smaller craft.

"Looks something like a government outfit," mused Jack. "Ah, here comes my man!"

Valda was coming back, sure enough.

Behind him trailed six Chinamen, raw, green-looking fellows. Each carried an enormous bundle, which, covered with rice-straw matting, resembled images or pieces of statuary. They had great difficulty in forcing their baggage into the 'bus. Once in, however, Valda spoke to them in Chinese, and the windows were all pulled up and the shades pulled down.

He himself got on the back step, and Jack heard him turn a key in the door.

"Home, Melaney!" he spoke.

"Of all the queer loads!" commented Jack, and kept up a furious thinking.

What was his load—important? surely. Too much trouble and circumlocution were involved in the securing of this strange cargo to make it a trivial one.

Jack had fully decided that it should never go to Chinatown, and was planning several brilliant moves, when, six squares from the scene of his recent adventures, Valda called a halt.

He came up alongside the 'bus.

"Melaney!"

"Eh?"

"Stop here. I'm not going home. I want to stow my people for the night somewhere else."

"Ah?"

"Cattle, but useful, and—valuable. Wait."

Valda glided away.

Jack saw him enter the door of a cheap lodging-house. The minute he disappeared Jack Burton whipped up.

He heard quite a chatter in the 'bus, but he did not heed it. Jack forced the

two horses to their best rate of speed. His eyes grew brighter and his breath came quicker every corner he turned.

His face was supremely satisfied as he took a glance at a neat, familiar residence, and halted in front of it.

"Home!" he breathed, softly, but with a chuckle.

He got down and pretended to be arranging the bit of one of the horses.

From a little front 'bus window one of the leery-eyed occupants of the vehicle peered out.

Bob bustled at the harness, whistling loud as he could.

Casual passers-by saw only a common omnibus halt for repairs in front of a pleasant-looking residence—only a driver whistling aimlessly as he moved about.

The whistle, however, was couched in the signal code of Nick Carter's detective school. The house was the home of the great New York detective.

CHAPTER XI.

JACK BURTON'S FAMOUS CATCH.

Out of the doorway of Nick Carter's house promptly peered a face. It was that of Mr. Carter's serving man.

Jack trilled a further bar of whistling melody.

In popped Nick's posted attache—out came a new form.

"Bob!" recognized Jack.

"Broke down, mister?" casually queried Bob Ferret, staring and guessing.

"Looks so—get nearer."

Jack's low-toned confidence made words count for all they were worth.

"Who's in the house?" he queried, quickly.

"Aleck—Larry."

"And Mr. Carter?"

"Yes."

"Get them——"

"What you got?"

"A load of Chinamen."

"What!"

"A big catch, I think. Don't want to alarm them."

"Fellow peeping out that front window looks leery now," reported Bob.

"May be followed. Want to stow them, and get back to Bull and another section of the case."

"How's Tannehill's livery—next block?"

"Good!"

"Friend of Mr. Carter's——"

"I know."

"Drive right in—by the time you're there we'll be on hand."

"I'll coop my catch just so."

"Jack," whispered Bob—"academy case?"

"Of the biggest kind!"

"Done brown of the brownest kind!" commented Bob, enthusiastically, five minutes later.

The 'bus had made a run up the livery slantway, and stood under guard and inspection behind closed doors.

Jack Burton spun his rapid story in yard lengths.

He only gave sentient skeleton points, but Nick Carter understood.

"Take charge of them," directed Jack.

"And their baggage?"

The veteran detective and his three assistants were so busy with the alarmed, vociferous passengers of the 'bus that they never missed Jack.

Jack, with an unfinished piece of work to do, mightily spurred up by his success, had started squarely back for the Chinese haunt.

One stop he made—a bolt into Nick Carter's, a bolt out of it.

It was to get a handy silk and wire-hooked ladder rope, which he knew would be effectively useful.

Then he sped forward for the Chinese den.

A flip of the ladder—Jack was over the fence.

A second—he was up through the sashless window.

His course, he determined, must be a speedy one.

Jack ran up the winding staircase to the Joss room.

Under the floor of the trap apartment he could hear loud outcries.

It was the driver whose place he had taken.

"They'll think it's their captive—young Buckley—no danger of Melaney getting an audience!" calculated Jack.

He found young Buckley with a

clearer head, but yet dazed with the drug.

He half understood what Jack projected—a rescue, an escape.

Jack got him to his feet down the stairs.

Guiding him through the window and to the rope ladder, young Buckley slipped.

"Too bad!" voiced Jack, in dismay.

There was a fearful clatter.

The boy had tumbled against, over, into the long sash light taken from the window frame.

"Out, out—quick! You've roused the sleepers, I guess!" urged Jack.

The crash had. Just as they reached the ground, before Jack could remove the hooked ladder, a dozen windows seemed to go up.

Cries rang out everywhere—lanterns flashed down into the yard.

Jack was hampered—he made a run for the gate, jerking at the ladder, but it had got caught, and he dared lose no time trying to remove it.

The gate was locked——Jack dragged his companion to a box.

"I'll boost you over—the street, or a massacre!" he declared.

A shot was fired—a sharp hatchet whizzed.

Crash!

The box, frail, broken, went down with both.

Jack put his charge behind him—he drew his revolver.

Jack thrilled a little as he saw at a window Valda, returned.

Beside him was Possum Washington.

Both had weapons.

Slam—crack—bang!

The two would-be marksmen were suddenly squelched.

From a screening lattice near the gate there poured up at the window a dozen projectiles, fired in quick succession.

A brick, a piece of wood, a window weight, an egg, a door knob, another brick, and so on, a heterogeneous fusilade from some refuse heap.

"This way!" spoke a welcome voice.

"Buff!" cried Jack.

"And company!"

"Eh?" queried Jack, with a start.

As he scurried with young Buckley behind the screen, Jack noticed a shadowy figure working at some door.

"Fellow I nosed into," explained Buff.

"A Chinaman?"

"Knows you—just gave me a magic password, too."

"What?"

"'Nlick Clarter.'"

"Why! it's——"

"Ont!" sounded with a roar at the smashing of a lock.

Into the street the four poured.

"Hello, Jackee!"

"Sam Tin!" shouted Jack.

"No givee away—callee me McGint!" grinned the audacious Chinaman.

"How did you get here——"

"Beakee jail—wantee clabby? Hey! Go in. Gooby!"

Sam Tin acted with a rush—he fairly slid the others across the pavement.

He made their heads spin bundling them into a cab happening to stand there.

"Hold on!" cried Jack.

"Sam velly busy!"

"I want——"

"Helpee Jackee!" chuckled Sam.

"See again—bullee detectlive—gooby!"

He was off like a flash—they were off in the same trim order.

"Where?" shot down the cabman.

"Nick Carter's—know it?"

"Like a book!"

Like a vivid climax chapter out of a book, were the revelations of the hour succeeding.

Nick Carter, after hearing Jack's story complete, sent a rush message to the police.

"We'll have Possum Washington and Valda within an hour," he said.

"And my 'bus load?" queried Jack.

"Your famous catch? Six Chinamen."

"I saw that."

"Six idols."

"Why! What——"

"Stuffed with opium."

"Aha!"

"They were ordered detained by Customs Officer John Buckley till he could see them—held at the revenue barracks. Claimed to have free admittance to the country as 'idol keepers' for Chinese Joss houses."

"And Valda?"

"Got a blank and Buckley's seal—
forged an order of release."

"I see the play."

"And you've caught all hands. Valda told a specious story of telegraphing to Florida for the release order. Anyway, he worked it."

Bob Ferret, having concluded his business in court, returned with Jack and Buff to Riverdale Academy.

They smuggled Lewis Buckley in, and not a student save his brother ever knew what a terrible experience he had undergone in Chinatown, what a scared, repentant fellow—with a narrow graze lesson taken fully to heart—he really was.

Nick Carter's three young detectives kept his secret, and he kept theirs.

The whole affair came near being given away two nights later, however.

A terrific explosion, the sudden strange lifting off of a whole cartload of fireworks on the campus, startled the school to excitement, and then a wonderment never explained.

Jack Burton was the first on the scene. He disappeared for two hours.

When he came back he called Bob and Buff into his room.

"Know what that grand display was?" he questioned.

"No."

"Sam Tiu."

"Eh!" stared Bob.

"Sure. The crazy fellow felt that a grand finale was due. He brought the fireworks here to set off in a bunch, and sneak. Premature explosion."

"You got him away?" guessed Buff.

"One patch of rags and blisters, but happy as a lark even in his misery. I've railroaded him to a hospital, and told him to behave himself."

"Will he?"

"He's afraid to come back here, for he broke jail, you know, and is wanted—says it's 'gooby' certain this time—going to China."

"Well!"

"First chance. Going to start 'a detective school' there, he says—'altee samee bullee Nlick Clarter!'"

[THE END.]

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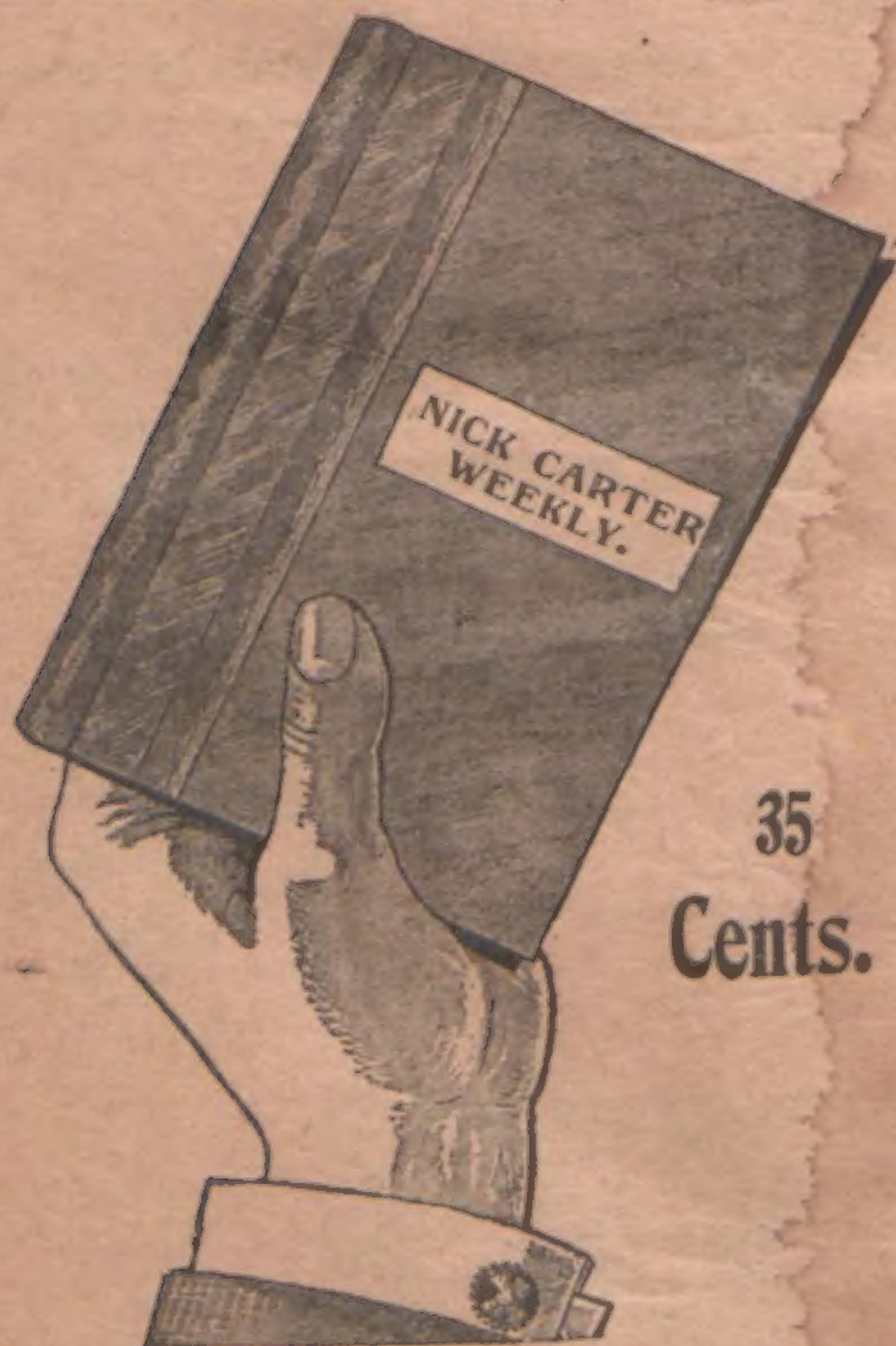
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